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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 QUITO 000589

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SUBJECT: ECUADOR'S WAVE OF VIOLENCE: POLITICAL ROOTS?

REF: QUITO 536

1. Summary: Almost a dozen prominent opponents of the GOE have been victims of assaults since February 2004. The attacks have taken place in two waves; the latest began in December 2004, and the frequency of violence has increased over the past two months. Ecuador recently agreed to the Organization of American States' Interamerican Commission on Human Rights' (CIDH) call to provide protection for seven individuals believed to be at the great risk and agreed to form a special unit to investigate. Opposition groups claim the violent incidents represent a pattern of government participation, although they lack evidence. Ecuadorian law enforcement and military believe at least some of the cases may be fraudulent. End Summary.

#### Most Notable Cases of Violence

2. The series of possibly politically-motivated violent events began with the February 1, 2004, attack on Leonidas Iza, president of CONAIE--Ecuador's largest indigenous organization. Eight days later Carlos Munoz, president of national television station Telesistema, was shot at and his driver was killed. An improvised explosive device exploded at the house of the president of the Supreme Tribunal Electorate, Nicanor Moscoso, on February 18. On March 1, Ivan Toral's, director of the newspaper El Tiempo, house was shot at. There have been no arrests in any of these cases.

3. The violence dissipated temporarily, only to reappear on December 15, when the offices of prominent businessman and well-known government critic, Blasco Penaherrera, were shot at. Former vice-president Leon Roldos was attacked by an unruly leftist student mob on January 26, 2005, and a week later unidentified suspects shot at the house of Quito city council member Antonio Ricaurte's mother. Shortly thereafter, a bomb exploded at a radio station owned by a member of the Ecuadorian NGO and AID democracy program grantee "Citizen Participation" (PC), and former government minister Patricio Acosta suffered an attempted kidnapping. Socialist congress member Enrique Ayala Mora was shot at on March 5, and two days later PC's offices in Quito were attacked (reftel). Two students were arrested on charges of attempted aggression in Roldos' case, but no other arrests have been made in any of these incidents.

#### Opposition Cries Foul

4. The opposition accused the government of carrying out the aforementioned assaults for political reasons. One left-leaning human rights group, ALDHU, claimed there have been 43 cases of political violence during Gutierrez's term. However, no evidence demonstrates the government's involvement. The opposition does concede that the recent attacks on Governor of Esmeraldas Rosa Cabezas and the manager of the Guarantor of Deposits Agency Carlos Arboleda prove that pro-government forced too have been attack victims.

#### Ecuadorian Government Responds to International Outcry

5. On February 25, the CIDH urged the GOE to provide protective measures to seven people deemed "at risk" including Penaherrera, Ricaurte, and Acosta. The CIDH urged the government to determine what occurred in the previous attacks, charge the perpetrators, and ensure victims receive reparations. The government offered to meet with these individuals on March 11 and has offered to provide protection. Transparency International also expressed concern about "threats, aggressive behaviors, and attempts . . . (in) a situation where the opposition is not being confronted by the institutional framework but rather political terrorism."

#### Comment

6. GOE opponents like ALDHU have inflated the number of cases of political violence, including incidents that are not politically motivated in their count, and accused the government of ordering the crimes, likely for their own

political gains. While they claim the government is behind the attacks, initial results of investigations by the Ecuadorian military and law enforcement authorities believe that several of these cases may be fraudulent, perpetrated by the victims themselves for personal and/or political gains. We have encouraged the government to investigate these events thoroughly and improve security measures.

KENNEY